

To: Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board

On: 01 September 2021

Report by: Director of Finance and Resources

Heading: Customer & Business Services Performance Report

1. **Summary**

- 1.1 This report details performance across key Customer & Business Service (CBS) functions including revenue collection and benefit administration for the period ending 28 July 2021 (including an update on the funding and expenditure position in relation to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and the Scottish Welfare Fund) as well as an update on delivery of the low Income Pandemic Payment. This report also provides a performance update in relation to customer services provision for July and year to date.
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2. **Recommendations**

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Board:
- Note the contents of the report.
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3. Revenue Collection

3.1 Council Tax

3.1.1 This section details the collection performance as at 28th July 2021 for Council Tax. It also provides details of the total sums collected for the previous financial year.

3.1.2 The billable sum for 2021/22 is £88,544,063.

3.1.3 The sums collected to date for 2021/22 are £36,975,286 which is 41.76% of the billable sum. This represents an increase of 1.22% in cash collection as a proportion of net charges billed compared with the same position for 2020/21. Aligned with other local authorities, recovery action had been suspended during the earlier part of the previous financial year leading to reduced/delayed income.

3.1.4 The Council Tax Reduction awarded is £13,859,433 amounting to 13.53% of the billable sum, which is 1.05% less than at the same point last year.

3.1.5 The Service continues to encourage the take-up of Council Tax Reduction. Activities include close tracking of potential applications and data matching to maximise Council Tax Reduction awards.

3.2 Non-Domestic Rates

3.2.1 This section details the collection performance as at 28th July 2021 for Non-Domestic Rates (NDR). It also provides details of the total sums collected for the last financial year.

3.2.2 The Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) charges billed for 2021/22 amount to £91,961,149, this is significantly higher the levied amount of £79,433,625 for 2020/21. Reduced take-up of Covid-19 reliefs by larger retailers largely accounts for the increase.

3.2.3 The cash receipts to date amount to £23,421,370 which is 25.47% of the sum billed. This is an increase in cash collection as a proportion of net charges billed of 23.60% compared with the same position for 2020/21.

3.2.4 During 2020/21 the introduction of Covid-19 reliefs, and delays in the provision of software changes to deal with these, delayed the billing of Non-Domestic Rates till July. Consequently, payment collection only commenced in August 2020 as opposed to the normal May date.

4. Benefit administration

4.1. This section details the processing performance in relation to Housing Benefit and the Scottish Welfare Fund, as at the end of July 2021. Also provided is an update on the funding and expenditure position in relation to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and the Scottish Welfare Fund.

4.2 The Service continues to successfully balance the varied and changing workload resulting from the impact of the pandemic.

4.3 **Speed of Processing – Housing/Council Tax Benefit**

- 4.3.1 As detailed in Table 1 below, processing speed for New Claims is well within target, due to a revised, improved process.
- 4.3.2 In relation to New Claims processed within 14 days of all information received, this measure is also within target for the period.
- 4.3.3 Processing of Changes in Circumstance (CIC) is well within target for the year to date but slightly over target for the reporting period during which period resource was diverted to processing increased volumes of Self-Isolation Support Grants.

(Supplementary processing information is attached in Appendix 2 for members' reference)

Table 1 – Performance Summary

Performance measure	5 Week Reporting Period 11 June 2021 to 15 July 2021	Year to date position	Annual Target
New Claims – processing time	15 days	13 days	24 days
New Claims - % processed within 14 days of all information received	95%	95 %	92%
Changes in Circumstance – processing time	12 days	5 days	10 days

4.4 **Discretionary Housing Payments**

- 4.4.1 The total budget for Discretionary Housing Payments for 2021/22 is shown in table 2 below.
- 4.4.2 Funding for DHP was previously provided to Local Authorities by the Department for Work and Pensions, following the new social security powers devolved to the Scottish Government (SG), DHP funding is now provided entirely by SG. The total budget is detailed in table 2 below and shows the indicative spending split provided to the Council.
- 4.4.2 The DHP budget has been calculated to include the full Scottish Government estimate of the amount of funding required to fully mitigate the effect of the Bedroom Tax. This estimate includes a 20% reserve allocation which will be paid in May 2022, if required.
- 4.4.3 In line with DHP Policy and DHP Regulations, the Service makes awards to fully mitigate the effect of the Bedroom Tax and maximise spend within the year.

- 4.4.4 Table 3 shows the performance information in relation to DHPs. The table shows that processing time in relation to DHP is within target.

Table 2 – DHP Budget

Funding – indicative allocations	amount
Renfrewshire Council	£100,000
Financial Hardship (non Benefit Cap) – Scottish Government	£93,733
Financial Hardship (Benefit Cap) – Scottish Government	£180,862
Bedroom Tax* – Scottish Government	£2,468,924
Total budget for the year	£2,843,519

*This figure represents the maximum amount required to cover the estimated shortfall of customers impacted by the Bedroom Tax.

Table 3 – DHP Performance Summary

Measure	1 April 2021 to 31 July 2021
Volume of DHP applications received	3,832 applications
Volume of DHP decisions made	3,348 decisions
Number of DHP awards	3,321 awards
Average processing time (target 29 days)	10 days
Total amount committed/paid	£2,008,768

4.5 The Scottish Welfare Fund

- 4.5.1 The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) provides a safety net for vulnerable people on low incomes through the provision of Community Care Grants and Crisis Grants. The Scottish Welfare Fund is a national scheme, underpinned by law and delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government by all local councils. The SWF replaced elements of the Social Fund abolished by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2013.
- 4.5.2 The Service makes awards in 2021/22 in line with Scottish Government guidance and had spent 33% of its total budget for the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) by the end of July 2021.

- 4.5.3 The Scottish Government allocated additional resources of £22 million across Scotland to meet additional demand for Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants, arising because of COVID-19. This resulted in an additional £0.782M being allocated to Renfrewshire, £0.424M of which is available in the 2021/22 budget.
- 4.5.4 The performance data relating to the Fund is presented in table 4 below. The Service has processed Crisis and Community Care Grants within target.
- 4.5.5 From October 2020, the Scottish Government committed to providing a grant of £500 to individuals who are in receipt of low-income benefits and who lost income because they are required to self-isolate to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- 4.5.7 The Scottish Welfare Fund was determined to be the legislative and delivery mechanism for Self-Isolation Support Grants (SISGs) in the form of Crisis Grants, as they are designed to provide occasional support to people facing immediate financial need which poses a risk to their health and wellbeing.
- 4.5.8 The Service made necessary operational arrangements to support the assessment, processing, and payment of SISGs. During July 1,088 applications were received which represents an 898% increase from the monthly average received during April and May. Table 5 below outlines the key performance information.

Table 4 – SWF Performance Summary (Crisis & Community Care Grants)

Measure	1 April 2021 to 31 July 2021
Number of Crisis Grant applications received	2,898
Number of Crisis Grant Awards	2,142
Total amount paid for Crisis Grants	£222,481
Average Processing time (2 working days target)	2 days
Average Processing time within July	2 days
Number of Community Care Grant applications received	766
Number of Community Care Grant Awards	446
Total amount paid for Community Care Grant	£336,383
Average processing time year to date (15 working days target)	10 days
Average processing time within July	12 days
Total amount paid/committed from the fund	£558,864
Budget provided by Scottish Government	£1,675,804

Table 5 – SWF Performance Summary (Self-Isolation Support Grants) (SISG)

Measure	1 April 2021 to 31 July 2021
Number of SISG applications received	1,901
Number of SISG Awards	1,184
Average Processing time (1 working day target)	4 days
Average Processing time within July	5 days
Total amount paid/committed from the fund	£592,000
Budget provided by Scottish Government	£592,000

5. Low Income Pandemic Payment

- 5.1 Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed that local authorities will act as the Scottish Government delivery agent for the Low Income Pandemic Payment; a £130 Low Income Pandemic Payment (LIPP) will be made to each household in receipt of Council Tax Reduction in April 2021 and to additional households who are either exempt from Council Tax or who have no liability.
- 5.2 It is anticipated that around 20,000 Renfrewshire households will benefit from this payment. The payment is intended to support the wellbeing of people living on low incomes and help them to manage the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on their household finances.
- 5.3 The payment can be used by recipients as they see fit and there is no requirement or expectation that payments received are used for a particular purpose. Common uses may include purchasing essentials, such as food and fuel.
- 5.4 LIPP payment will be made to households that meet the eligibility criteria by 31 October 2021.
- 5.5 At the middle of July, information letters were issued to 19,936 eligible households, advising them that they are eligible for the payment and explaining that they will be invited by letter to complete an on-line form to provide their bank account information.
- 5.6 To support effective delivery of this payment, invitation letters are currently being issued in batches giving guidance on how to access the form and explaining what information is required. The letters also explain how customers can request assistance to complete the form. Once the on-line form is completed by the council tax reduction recipient, validation checks will be carried out to minimise the risk of fraud before payments are issued, normally within 2 working days.

- 5.8 It is expected that following the deployment of this batch process full delivery will be completed in a 12-14 week period.
- 5.9 By 20th August 2021 9,072 invitation letters had been issued and 3,940 payments, totalling £512,200, had been paid to customers.

6. Customer Service Provision

- 6.1 This section details the performance of the customer service for July 2021, and the current year to date position.
- 6.1.1 The report provides an update on the overall contact centre call handling volumes and response times. Face-to-face services remain closed because of the pandemic; however, plans are progressing to start a phased re-introduction of critical face to face services from mid-August.
- 6.1.2 COVID-19 continues to see an increase in demand for Digital Services and this report will update members on the level of online transactions being completed.
- 6.2 **Telephone Call handling**
- 6.2.1 High level monthly summary – for the month of July, the contact centre received 28,281 calls and answered 96% against a primary target of 90% for the period.

Table 6 – Customer Service Unit – Primary Target (call handling)

Primary target	Year	Calls Received	July Performance	Year to Date
90% calls answered	2021	28,281	96%	97%
	2020	29,089	99%	97%

- 6.2.3 The contact centre achieved the primary target of answering 90% of all calls. The percentage of calls answered has dropped slightly for the month however the year-to-date position remains consistent with last year's performance.
- 6.2.4 Noting that calls for the month were slightly below July 2020 levels, year to date, the contact centre has received 11,482 calls more than the same period last year (a 10% increase in demand). Further information is provided in section 5.2.5 on the main services contributing to this increase.
- 6.2.5 The secondary target is to respond to 70% of all calls within 40 seconds

Table 7 – Customer Service Unit – Secondary Target (call handling)

Secondary target	Year	July Performance	Year to Date
70% calls in 40 seconds	2021	54%	57%
	2020	66%	78%

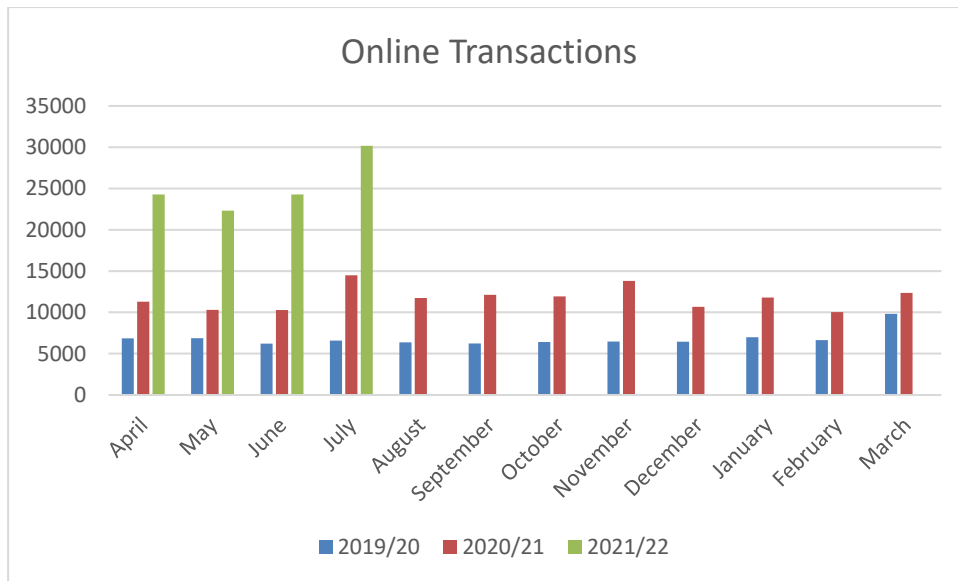
- 6.2.6 The Service has continued to respond to an increase in demand for certain services which were always going to have an impact as restrictions relaxed and more services became available to customers.
- 6.2.7 The lockdown in the early part of this year created backlogs in customer demand which are now materialising in an overall increase, as reported earlier. Although the overall increase appears relatively modest, there are some services which are experiencing a considerable increase in call volumes, impacting on the call centre's ability to answer the calls within the 40 second target. The services which are more significantly impacted in the first four months of this year are:
- Waste and Recycling – a 11% increase in demand compared to the same period last year due to issues with supply of bins resulting in extended lead times to fulfil customer requests for new and replacement bins, as reported to the Infrastructure, Land and Environment board in May 2021.
 - Council Tax – a 36% increase in demand compared to last year due to the resumption of all collection activity which was paused during the same period last year.
 - Housing Repairs – a 57% increase in demand due to restart of all repair activity following period of lockdown which limited activity to essential repairs only.
 - Blue Badges – a 77% increase in demand caused by an inability to conduct face to face assessments which is extended the decision making for all applications where the customer is not automatically eligible to receive the badge.
- 6.2.8 This overall increase in demand is anticipated to continue for several months and will become more challenging as we move into the autumn / winter period which is, in normal years, already a busier time of the year for the contact centre.
- 6.2.9 In July specifically, the service level was also impacted by Free School Meals and Clothing grants, with 5 staff supporting the processing of 3,139 applications for 5,218 children. This has meant that the available resources to support call handling have been reduced during this period.
- 6.2.10 The call centre is also experiencing a resumption of staff turnover and movement to other jobs within and outside the Council. This turnover was not present last year due to the job market slowing during the early months of the pandemic. Recruitment is underway to fill these vacancies and a small number of agency temporary staff have been deployed to support some of the less complex services, releasing experienced staff to handle the higher volume and more complex calls.

6.3 Face to face provision

- 6.3.1 The Customer Service Centres in Paisley, Johnstone and Renfrew were closed on 23rd March 2020 due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. All services continued with support being given to customers over the telephone or through online services. The team continued to support the Registration and Licensing services using an adapted operating model.
- 6.3.2 In total, the team have carried out 523 birth registrations and 657 death registrations and have processed 350 licensing applications since the start of April 2021. These services have been delivered through a mix of telephone and online interaction with customers, with birth registrations also including a short face to face visit to validate and sign certificates.
- 6.3.3 Preparations are ongoing to support the phased restart of face-to-face services from mid-August. The first phase will be the move of Registration and Licensing from 5 High Street back to Renfrewshire House and the second phase will re-open Housing Benefits, Council Tax and Blue Badge support for customers who require it. All services will be managed on an appointment basis and initial support will be offered over the telephone in all cases.

6.4 Digital Services

- 6.4.1 The council continues to see an increase in the use of their online services with a further 1,781 new users registered on the platform since 1st April 2021. This continues the trend seen throughout last year, with a total of 15,697 new users since the start of the pandemic. The Council's MyAccount service is now used by 89.7% of all households in Renfrewshire, compared to 69% of households in March 2020.
- 6.4.2 The level of online transactions also continues to rise, with a 281% increase in customers using the MyAccount platform to request Council Services compared to the same period in 2019. The graph below shows the level of online transactions per month since the start of April 2019.
- 6.4.3 Since the start of April this year there have been 101,030 transactions supported on the MyAccount platform, compared to 140,771 the whole of the last financial year.



Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** - The level of collection of Local Taxation continues to provide funding for the delivery of Council services throughout Renfrewshire. In relation to the LIPP, Scottish Ministers have committed to fully fund the payments and committed to an allocation of administration funding for local authorities in recognition of the administration overhead that will be required to deliver the payments. The administration funding allocated to Renfrewshire Council is £147,820.
2. **HR & Organisational Development** –temporary resources are being recruited to provide support to customers who require it to access the LIPP. The recruitment and recruitment mechanism have been agreed with the Council's HR team.
3. **Community/Council Planning –**
 - Our Renfrewshire is fair - An effective Benefits service is vital to the quality of life of many of our citizens as it provides vital support for low income households to sustain tenancies and meet their rent obligations
 - Working together to improve outcomes - An efficient and effective billing and administrative process for the collection of local taxes is vital for ensuring the recovery of income to the council to support the provision of local services. This is supported by a range of payment opportunities for the public, including electronic and digital payments (e.g. Direct Debit, Website and Telephone).
 - Working together to improve outcomes – An efficient and effective Customer Service Unit is vital to ensuring citizens have equality of access to Council services whether this is digitally, by telephone or face to face
4. **Legal** – None
5. **Property/Assets** - None
6. **Information Technology** – None
7. **Equality & Human Rights** - The recommendations contained within this report in relation to performance updates has been considered in relation to its impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report because it is for consideration of performance only. In terms of the LIPP, Renfrewshire Council is acting as delivery agent for Scottish Government policy and is following Scottish Government guidance on how to implement and delivery the LIPP. As such the equality and human rights impacts of this policy are a matter for Scottish Government.

8. **Health & Safety** - None
9. **Procurement** – None
10. **Risk** - None
11. **Privacy Impact** – – A Privacy Impact Assessment will be developed as part of the delivery arrangements for the Low Income Pandemic payment and privacy notices included on the form used to gather information from eligible customers
12. **Cosla Policy Position** – COSLA leaders have agreed that councils will act as the Scottish Government delivery agent for payment of the Low Income Pandemic Payment to those that meet the SG eligibility criteria
13. **Climate Risk** – None

List of Background Papers

- (a) None

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Appendix 1

RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

REVENUES COLLECTION STATEMENT AS AT 28th July 2021

COUNCIL TAX		
	2020/21	2021/22
	£m	£m
Projected Yield	97.740	98.307
Gross Charges	100.853	102.403
Less rebates	14.347	13.859
Net Charges Billed	<u>86.506</u>	<u>88.544</u>
Cash Collected	81.912	36.975
Rebate Grant	14.347	13.859
	<u>96.259</u>	<u>50.835</u>
Cash collected as % of Net Charges	94.69%	41.76%
Income as % of Projected Yield	98.48%	51.71%

NON DOMESTIC RATES		
	2020/21	2021/22
	£m	£m
Projected Yield	77.845	90.122
Gross Charges	145.689	145.717
Less reliefs	66.256	53.756
Net Charges Billed	<u>79.434</u>	<u>91.961</u>
Cash Collected	72.589	23.421
Cash collected as % of Net Charges	91.38%	25.47%
Cash collected as % of Projected Yield	93.25%	25.99%

Customer & Business Services Performance Report – Appendix 2

Supplementary KPIs – Finance & Resources Policy Board

APPEALS

Where a claimant disputes a Benefits decision and also disputes a revision decision they can formally make an Appeal. The Benefits Service will prepare a detailed submission which is then considered by the Independent Tribunals Service. Preparation of a submission is a very involved process and requires significant data gathering.

Target processing speed (number of days)	60		
Result: last 3 months (days)	May: 83 days	June: 160 days	July: 75 days
Average (12 months to date)	57 days		
Average Appeals Completed	3 Appeals per month		

Comment:- Appeals volumes very low, which is expected due to reducing Housing Benefit caseload. Monthly targets were missed due to staff being utilised for processing Self-Isolation Support Grants.

REVISIONS

Where a claimant disputes a benefits decision in the first instance, they can request for it to be looked at again. This is known as a Revision. The process involves a Senior Benefit Assessor reviewing the decision thoroughly to decide whether the decision should stand.

Target	28 days		
Result last report	January 21: 44	February 21: 27	March 21: 34
Result Last 3 months	May 21: 20	June 21: 42	July 21: 29

Comment:- The Service has missed target for revisions processing as a result of balancing workloads, including the processing of Self-Isolation Support Grants.

ACCURACY

The Service proactively monitors the accuracy of benefits decisions made through a robust audit checking programme. The Service targets to audit 4% of all calculations. The actual level of checking for this reporting period is higher due to a number of new staff joining the Benefits team and therefore requiring 100% of their work to be checked.

	Target %	Actual %
Volume of Audits 2021/22	4%	30 %
Accuracy – July 21	95%	93 %
Accuracy – 2021/22	95%	92 %

Comment:- The Service has set a stretching target for Accuracy with current performance being slightly below target. The service continues to analyse errors and action trends/patterns by providing additional guidance/training where needed.

Customer & Business Services Performance Report – Appendix 2 Supplementary KPIs – Finance & Resources Policy Board

HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS

The service is responsible for raising overpayments where Housing Benefit has been paid in error. If these have resulted from errors made by claimants, the cost is partially funded by the DWP. The service attempts to recover both newly raised and historic debts from claimants or landlords as appropriate. In year collections performance is detailed below.

Overpayments raised 2021/22	£411,208
Overpayments raised and recovered in year	£82,779
% recovery	20.13%
All recovery in year	£400,148
All recovery vs raised in year	97.31%
All recovery vs all debt	4.97%
Total debt outstanding at end of reporting period	£7,654,594